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Recommendations analysed

by

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(By T. L. SCHREINER, M.L.A.)

The plausible recommendations of the Transvaal Liquor Commission anent the supply and sale by the Government of Kafir beer to natives in certain proclaimed areas, are apt to mislead people who do not grasp the question in all its bearings.

Two members of the Commission, Messrs. De Villiers and Munnik, would extend the proposal to the sale of malt liquors and natural wines, Mr. De Villiers suggesting the following alcoholic strength: Kafir beer, up to 13 per cent. of proof spirit, instead of 3 of alcohol as at present allowed; malt liquors, up to 10 per cent.; wines, up to 20 per cent.!

The basis on which these recommendations, and, in fact, the whole of the report, rests is twofold—namely, that in Union liquor legislation there must be a relaxation of the restrictions on the sale of liquor as imposed by the Transvaal Liquor Law, and that the native “must be allowed access to the milder forms of alcohol at first, and, if he endures this test, other forms must gradually be thrown open to him, until all restrictions are done away”: the inference pretty clearly indicated being, if he cannot learn self-control in relation to the stronger kinds of alcoholic liquor, let him perish off the face of the earth.

The position that in any liquor legislation for the Union the restrictions of the Transvaal Law must be relaxed is absurd, and not in accord with the teachings of the history of South Africa, where prohibition of the sale of intoxicating liquor to natives has been universally allowed to be the right thing in the interests of the European population, as well as that of

the natives themselves. Both of these sections unite in demanding it, and almost all South African statesmen, politicians, ministers of religion, and men engaged in professions, commerce, and agriculture, with the exception of the wine and brandy farmers and merchants, the brewers, and the distillers, have ever been in favour of it.

Every Colony and State of South Africa, has placed it on its Statute Book, to the great benefit of the people, with the exception of the Cape Colony, where the political power of the wine farmer, out of all proportion to his numbers, has succeeded in the past in preventing the blessing of a full measure of prohibition being granted by the Cape Legislature. That is, however, no reason why it should not be granted by the Union Parliament.

In this connection let the fact, ignored by the Commission, be remembered, that there is infinitely more drunkenness and its evils springing from the use of wine (not brandy, as the Commission states) among the coloured people of the western part of the Cape Province, where the supply of wine daily as rations and the sale of intoxicating drink to them is allowed, than there is among the natives, where the sale of liquor is wholly or partially prohibited.

Were it not for the restrictions of the Transvaal Law, drunkenness and consequent crime would be far more prevalent on the Rand than it is even now. The evasions of the law only go to prove its necessity, and the remedy is increased and improved police supervision of a clean and upright character. The movement in the Union must be one of levelling up to the standard of the most stringent liquor legislation at present existing in the country, not one of levelling down to that of the least stringent.

The establishment of Government can-
teens for the sale of Kafir beer will not prevent the illicit buying and drinking of stronger liquors. The men who have once got the crave for fiery poisonous drinks will not deign to drink Kafir beer or even natural wine, which latter beverage Mr. Piet Cilliers, an outspoken wine farmer,

is reported only the other day to have stigmatised as "muck," which the natives on the Rand would not drink because it has no bite in it. All that the Government canteen will do will be to entice a considerable number of natives who do not drink alcoholic beverages at all now, to begin drinking them, and the great evils of the illicit traffic will go on just as at present.

Despite these great evils, no one in his senses would wish to go back to the much more terrible condition of things which existed on the Gold Fields before the prohibitory law was passed and enforced.

The Commission entirely ignores the fact that a vast number of natives—quite apart from the law prohibiting the sale of liquor to them—are total abstainers by the exercise of that "moral strength" and "self-control" which they are supposed to lack altogether, and this they are in as large a proportion as among Europeans.

This is true of the members of almost all the various Mission churches, who furnish an example which it would be well if the members of European churches would follow.

There is no reason why the mass of the native population of South Africa, leaving those of Portuguese territory out of the question, should not become increasingly a total abstinence people, from conviction and in practice, to the great benefit of both themselves and the Europeans; but the Commission would seem to disapprove entirely of such a consummation, and insists on the necessity of their gradually learning to drink the strongest liquors.

The Portuguese natives are certainly accustomed to the use of fortified wines imported from Portugal, and to even stronger alcoholic liquors; but surely no right-thinking person would wish to see the natives of the Union debased into the apathetic, sottish, sodden, soul-less type of being that forms the majority of the Portuguese natives. I have visited the Delagoa Bay Province, and what I saw and heard bears out the correctness of the following statement, which appeared

in the Press some time ago, and is of higher authority than those quoted by "M.R." in his letter on the subject:

"Dr. Rolla, the Portuguese Government's Commissioner to inquire into the condition of the natives in those parts, reports that the practically universal habit of drunkenness is the main cause of native degeneration, with, as subsidiary evils, the abuse of tobacco and dagga.

"The natives will tipple anything strong enough that they can get. He cites cases in which the whole population of a village, including the children, have been found in a state of complete intoxication at eight or nine o'clock in the morning. The whole of the country through which he passed was honeycombed with primitive contrivances for the fermentation or distilling of liquors, and with canteens for the sale of "Kafir wine, an abomination imported in vast quantities from Portugal, which he considers as far more dangerous and harmful than any of the native concoctions.

This wine, which contains an extraordinary percentage of alcohol, is manufactured specially for sale to the natives, upon whom its effects are disastrous."

Under these circumstances, the compulsory sobriety that they more or less are forced to practise at the Rand mining companies must be of real benefit to these Portuguese natives, and the idea that in order to give them liquor, such as they are accustomed to in Portuguese territory, the door is to be opened to the demoralisation and injury of the natives of the Union is simply outrageous, and is not made less so by "M.R.'s" plea on behalf of the poor wine farmer, who has lately been selling his ordinary wine at only from £7 to £9 a leaguer, which means enormous profits.

The concern of the Commission for the training of the native up from the use of Kafir beer "of an approved alcoholic strength" to the use of stronger European liquors, would seem to be really nothing but a thinly-veiled concern for the increased profits of the wine farmer and the liquor seller.

If it be argued that the peculiar conditions of the Rand render the supply of Kafir beer to natives necessary, then I would point out that the mining companies and other employers of labour have already the sanction of the law for making Kafir beer containing not more than 3 per cent. of alcohol, and supplying it to their employees, and this is all that is necessary. Left in the hands of employers, we may be sure that the least possible harm will accrue, as their whole interest lies in keeping their labourers strong, healthy, sober, and fit for work.

During the late visit of members of Parliament to the Transvaal, I had the opportunity of visiting the works of a mining company of considerable magnitude—the City Deep—and among other investigations I took pains to ascertain the details connected with the manufacture of Kafir beer for the native labourers. A good-sized building is devoted to this purpose, containing about a dozen large fermentation cauldrons and all the paraphernalia for the manufacture of Kafir beer, under the charge of the compound manager and a skilled Zulu, who explained the various steps in the process to me, and satisfied me that the Kafir beer made there is in accord with the requirements of the law, and is valuable not because of the alcohol it contains, but because of its well-known antiscorbutic properties.

According to the analysis and experiments in connection with Kafir beers carried out by Miss Doidge, M.A., a South African specialist in bacteriology, the fermentation of light Kafir beer produces but little alcohol, and is somewhat similar to the acid lactic fermentation of amas or sour milk as prepared by the natives, which is again said to be identical with the fermentation produced by the Bulgarian bacillus.

But Kafir beer containing 5 per cent. or over of alcohol is an intoxicating drink, containing no such useful bacteria, and is capable of creating the crave for alcohol which leads to inebriety.

The Kafir beer made by the company already alluded to is given to the natives

on Saturday and Sunday, and I suppose other mining companies supply a similar beverage to their native labourers. If this already existing supply of Kafir beer does not succeed in putting a stop to the illicit liquor traffic, neither will the supply of Kafir beer made and sold by a Government Department do so, and it will at the same time involve many practical drawbacks and inconveniences compared with the present arrangement.

The argument has been used that the native labourers, on coming to the surface from their underground work will be benefited by having a stimulant given them. Even so; but there are better and truer stimulants, and more lasting in their beneficial effects, than alcoholic ones, and I was glad to find at the shaft head of the mine already mentioned, that preparations are daily made for the supply of a good large mug, or more than one, of the best Van Houten's cocoa to each native on coming up from below, and that the arrangements made at a great expense for changing and drying clothing, for protecting the natives from cold, wind, and dust on their way to their quarters, for bathing, for the necessary supply of meat and vegetables, etc., etc., leave nothing to be desired.

Such being the condition of things, why should any one, to further the monetary interests of the wine and brandy farmer, propose that Government shops for the selling to natives of intoxicating liquor—such as Mr. De Villiers's wine at 20 per cent. proof spirit—should be set up, or that alcoholic liquor should be given to the natives at the shaft head instead of cocoa.

In addition to what has been already advanced against the scheme of the Commission, there is, further, a grave objection to the principle of Government liquor monopoly—i.e., of Government or any governing body identifying itself with any dangerous or evil system from which it should be its duty to safeguard the people, a duty which becomes more difficult of execution the moment the Government or governing body, or the people

themselves, become the recipients of large monetary profits from such a system.

Even if a Government liquor monopoly were to diminish some evils connected with the liquor traffic, it would do so at the cost of inflicting other and greater evils on the community; for the worst of all evils that can befall a nation is that it should cease to expect its Government to be pure and clean, or to be actuated only by the highest good of its subjects, and should be satisfied to see it lowered to the level of a hurtful, selfish, mercenary trade.

Another retrogressive recommendation of the Commission is that the sale to coloured persons and Asiatics for consumption on the premises only of any liquor except spirits should be legalised.

This proposal overthrows the protection for coloured people which has existed and still exists in the Transvaal, Orange Free State, and Natal, and will, I believe, never be consented to by the representatives of these Provinces in Parliament. The advantage to be gained in the Cape Colony by restricting the sale to coloured people and Asiatics to consumption on the premises, which I acknowledge would be a real one, can be equally secured under the provisions of the Innes Act, and at any rate it ought not to weigh in the balance against the harm that will be inflicted on the coloured people in the other Provinces by the proposed recommendation if carried into law.

The recommendation should have been in just the opposite direction namely, that the existing law of the Transvaal should become the law of the Union. There is a very much larger proportion of the coloured men and women of even the wine-making districts of the Cape who are in favour of the prohibition of the sale of liquor to themselves than is generally supposed. It is, for instance, the almost universal desire and request of these people that the sale of liquor to their womenfolk should be prohibited by law, and there are thousands of coloured men who are members of the True Templar and other temperance organisations, and thousands

more who are total abstainers, though not belonging to any temperance society. In fact, I believe that, taking men and women together, there is a considerable majority of the coloured people in favour of prohibition.

The Witwatersrand Church Council, in its criticism on the report of the Transvaal Liquor Commission, says: "While we cannot but express disappointment that very little of what the temperance and religious bodies asked for has been recommended in the report, we have to admit that the Commission was appointed, not with the intention of ascertaining whether and in what way it might be desirable to strengthen the law, but with the avowed object of relaxing it, as will be seen on referring to paragraphs (b) and (c) of the terms of reference. That being so, we cannot but think that the submission of valuable evidence by those who favoured restriction and prohibition has turned out to be of little use, and the ignoring of such evidence seems to us to reduce the work of the Commission to something very like a farce."

The Transvaal Missionary Association says: "We are of opinion that the conclusions of the Commissioners are opposed to the facts and evidence adduced before them and to their own reasonings thereon. . . . We would specially draw the attention of the Government to the opinions of the Portuguese officials contained in the appendix to the report, especially as these have been framed with sufficient experience of the effect of supplying Colonial wine to the natives; we submit that more conclusive and damning evidence it would be impossible to collect. . . . We believe the suggestion to teach the natives moderation by supplying them with liquor to be most fallacious, and will be most disastrous."

When once the people of the Union grasp all the bearings of these and other equally retrogressive recommendations of the Commission, their good common sense, based on the experience of the past, may be trusted to lead them to reject them, as not tending to the welfare of the country as a whole.

